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ABSTRACT

The last 25 years of special education has seen the pendulum swing from over confidence in special class placement to current efforts to mainstream handicapped children. Characteristic of children entering school is variation in ability and learning style. Some of the children will be referred to special education not because of extreme learning problems but because of poor teaching in the regular classroom. The teacher is the most important variable in the child's educational experience, and the teacher who can effectively individualize instruction will need to refer fewer children to the special educator. Public schools must take an active role in the teacher training process. Children must be protected from experienced teachers who suffer from sporadic mental health problems. Improved inservice training programs such as university credited courses are needed. Special educators should involve themselves with improving the diagnostic placement process, promoting a view of special education as an extension of regular class placement, and redefining handicapping conditions which require segregated classes. (DB)

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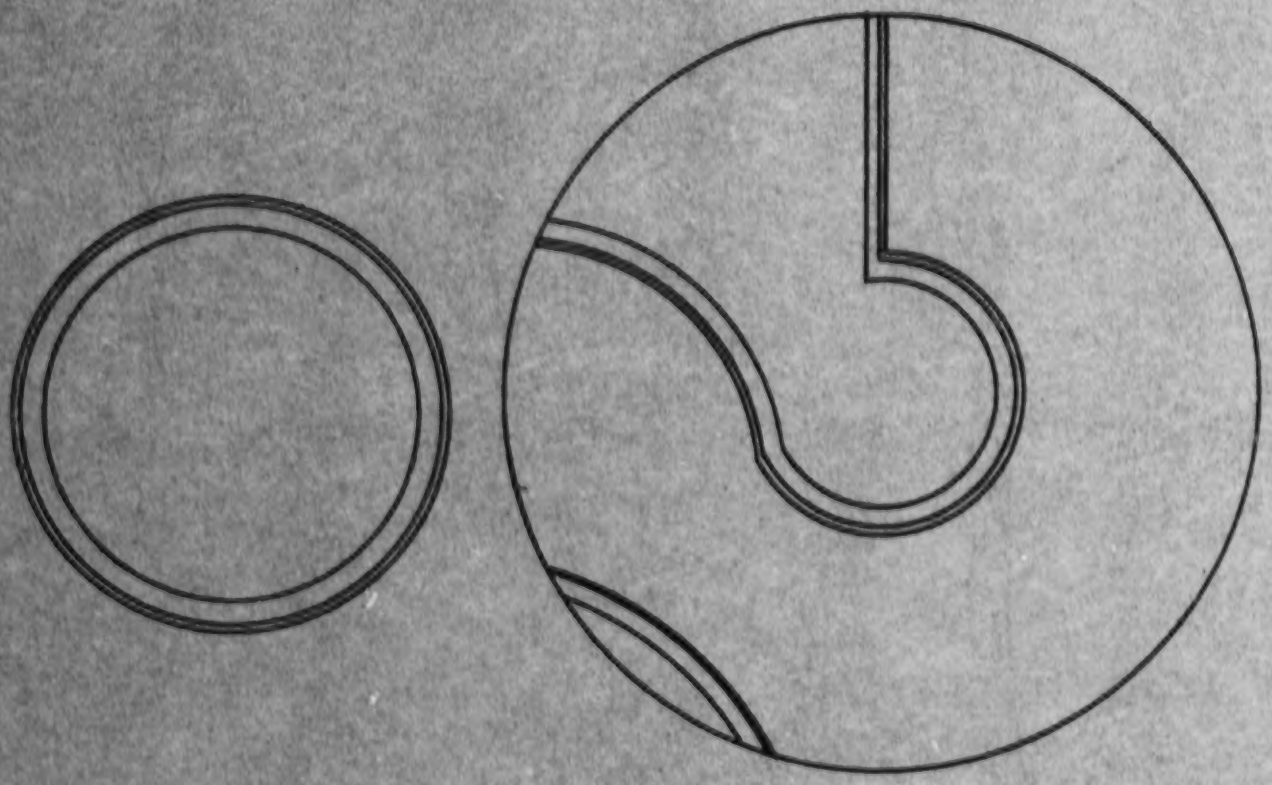
EXCEPTIONAL CHILD EDUCATION: A Dumping Ground For All Educational Failures?



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A LEGACY OF SERVICE: A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

"Exceptional Child Education: A Dumping Ground For All Educational Failures?"

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As you look back on a legacy of service to exceptional children which extends more than 25 years, and look forward with a renewed commitment to excellence it seems appropriate to take a close look at some of the stages of development which you have witnessed in your programs for exceptional children. We might even look at some of the "fads" which we have survived, and check closely to see where the swing of the pendulum will take us next. It might even prove profitable to intervene as the pendulum swings, and to take decisive action to re-direct the pendulum, rather than allowing ourselves to become passive recipients of each passing phase.

As I look back over the last 25 years in the service of children with unique needs, I remember the times when a child with specific learning disability was described by his teacher as a "child with a mental block."

During that era, advice to parents of emotionally disturbed children, even autistic or psychotic children, was what I would now classify as the category of "when are you going to stop beating your wife." The idea that some children deviated from the accepted norm of behavior because of biochemical and/or genetic variations had not occurred to us.

When, in 1947, Strauss and Lehtineus' work with brain-injured children hit the professional field, it was a most welcome relief from the extrapolation of limited data derived from a Rorschach or a TAT with behaviorally disordered children. Now I heave another sigh of relief as I see hopeful signs that we and the children we serve have successfully survived the "brain-damaged era" of special education.

I assume that many of you who have served in the field of mental retardation remember the "glutamic acid" days, when every child whose parents could afford it was on glutamic acid. I hate to think of the hopes of cure that were raised by the purveyors of glutamic acid in those days, and the reams and reams of research attempting to validate changes reported in the children. It makes me wonder if, in another 25 years we will look back on the "ritalin era" and wonder how we could have been so naive.

I imagine some of you were involved as I was with mongoloid children who were going to be cured by the pilgrimage to Detroit where a pediatrician who shall remain nameless lest I help to perpetuate his memory, would prescribe a variety of medications including vitamins, thyroid extract, pituitary, etc. which would "cure" the mongolism. Or a few years later, when the panacea for mongolism emanated from Munich, Germany, in the form of illicit shipments of something called "cellular therapy" prescribed for a child by a physician not licensed to practice in the United States, who would examine children in his hotel room on his frequent visits to this country.

I'm sure some of you remember the era when even persons who were committed to the education of exceptional children could sleep peacefully at night, after telling parents that "there is no room" in the inn - in our school system - for your child. Or the time when we thought we had really performed a service for a child by putting him on our waiting list - a wait that lasted 3 or 4 years, for a child who had no time to wait or waste!

As the pendulum has swung over the past 25 years, we have seen the population of our orthopedically handicapped classes change almost completely - from a preponderance of post-polio children to a preponderance of cerebral palsied children and multiple handicapped post-rubella babies. We have seen cerebral palsied children emerge from the closets and back rooms and enter our public schools. We have even felt the impact of Winthrop Phelps'research which almost convinced us that all cerebral palsied children had normal intelligence. We have even survived, and I hope the children did, the days of youthful exuberance in Special Education where every kid with a congenital heart, a leg brace, or hemophilia was placed in a class for the physically handicapped - until we started to ask ourselves WHY?

-"Until we started to ask ourselves WHY? -Until Lloyd Dunn shook us up a little in 1968 with his Manifesto for Handicapped Children - until DCBD shook us all up a lot at the CEC convention in Denver by stating unequivocally that special educators had been guilty of perpetrating a crime against children - by creating islands which set handicapped children apart from the mainstream of education, and denying their rights to equal protection under the law.

With the last 25 years under our belts - and that last 25 pounds - we have lots to be proud of - and lots to wonder about - and lots of questions which remain unanswered.

As we reaffirm our commitment to excellence this evening, I would like you to look carefully at some of the critical elements in our educational system which need some premeditated manipulation if we are to avoid some of the pitfalls of the past, and provide more realistic service in the future to the unique learners for whom we are all responsible.

In looking at these critical elements in our educational system, let's start by looking at our schools every September - and especially let's look closely at the kindergarten or first grades.

This past September, in each of our schools, teachers of first grade children greeted a motley collection of children who had little but chronological age in common. Most of them were six years old, with a range from four to eight. Some of your districts may have early entrance policies which could permit a child who is not yet five to enter first grade. Some districts on the other hand, may practice exclusion policies which require "not ready" children to remain home until the September after their seventh birthday.

Most of these children had IQ's between 84 and 116, with a range from below 50 to over 200.

It also seems safe to hypothesize that most of them were either boys or girls. Most of them were toilet trained. Most of them, thank God, will learn. They will learn in spite of the fact that the range of learning ability at the first grade level is four years. Some are ready to learn at or below the four year level, while some are ready to learn at or above the eight year level.

Some will learn because of skillful teaching; some will learn in spite of gross incompetence. Some will learn because the demands of the curriculum of the first grade happen to match their learning style. Those with good auditory skills will make it in a phonetic approach to reading. Some will not learn because the demands of the curriculum do not match the design of their unique learning patterns.

Some of these little treasures will not learn either by accident or by design because they deviate so markedly from the norm of their group, physically, intellectually, socially, or emotionally, that even the best teacher and the finest curriculum cannot meet their needs in the regular classroom with 30 other children.

By the time these same children get to fourth grade there will be a six year range in their abilities, with some still learning below the first grade level, and some learning at the seventh grade level or above. Some will be in special classes because of their very specialized needs; some will be in special classes because their teachers needed them to be. They will have become victims of dyspedagogia!! Not children with extreme learning problems, but victims of poor teaching. WHY?

Can special education continue to be the dumping ground for general education - continuing to accept children who belong in the regular classroom? Can special educators continue to respond to parental pressure to place children in special classes when we know those children belong in the regular class without being stigmatized as "handicapped"? Or is it not time for those of us in special education to reach out to regular teachers and administrators with creative applications of the knowledge we have gained about exceptional children - creative applications of this knowledge to all children? Is it not time for us to encourage parents to demand teachers who can teach and curricula which is responsive to the needs of children, and not to settle for mediocrity? The maximum in the individualization of instruction is mandatory for children. It is also our goal for all children! If we continue to support the removal from the classroom or the school of those children who deviate from the pre-conceived notion of how children learn, are we not perpetuating the notion of "he doesn't belong in my class."

In an attempt to conceptualize a model for communicating about this latest swing of the pendulum, I would like you to visualize an orange-sorting machine - a conveyor upon which is dumped all shapes, sizes, and varieties of oranges.

The conveyor moves the oranges along a circumscribed route, culling out at each stage the oranges which do not meet the standards of Grade A, Number 1, Hi-Quality oranges. At the first level of sorting, the little bitty ones drop through small slots set up to grade and sort by size. The slots gradually increase in size until all the oranges are culled out except the extra large, super-duper, eating oranges.

At the next level of sorting and grading, all of the odd-shaped oranges are sorted out, until only the large perfectly shaped oranges remain and have survived the sorting and grading system. At each stage the culls are sorted out, gathered up, and carefully graded, tagged, and priced according to size, shape, color, quality, and pedigree.

Now visualize with me what happens in each of our schools every September. Think with me about how carefully we grade and sort the children, culling out those who vary in shape, size, consistency, or pedigree until at the twelfth grade only those who meet our grading and sorting criteria have managed to survive the system.

As children are dumped into our grading and sorting system in September, they encounter a series of slots that could be labeled "teacher competency." It is at this first level of screening that we begin to sort out those children who will survive in the regular class.

The most important variable in any child's educational experience is his teacher. If a child, any child, even the little bitty ones and the odd shaped ones and the middle sized and, heaven forbid, the blighted ones, happen to fall into the hands of a creative, responsive, warm, human M & Ms that I have seen in so many of our schools, that child is indeed fortunate. If in addition that teacher is able to get classroom behavior under control, to have expert current knowledge of the subject to be taught, to have a husband who is neither transferred nor fertile, to have the baby sitting situation under control, and also to have the physical health and stamina to keep sick days to a minimum, then our discussion could stop here - for such a teacher would have no need to cull out those who don't quite fit. Most of our handicapped children would not need to be graded and labeled. Especially if this paragon of virtue is provided with the administrative support which can be critical in creating an educational climate which even the best teacher needs if she is to be freed to use her teaching abilities to their fullest. If every child, regardless of the ways in which he deviates from the norm could be guaranteed a good teacher, the need for special education would be reduced considerably.

As I view the current educational scene and especially the numbers of children being referred for placement in special education classes, especially classes for the educationally handicapped, the socially maladjusted, the emotionally disturbed and the language and learning disabled, it becomes immediately apparent that these problems in large degree are being created by and are the direct result of poor teaching in the regular classroom, and lack of a well directed militancy on the part of the special educators and parents.

I find it very difficult to accept that a child can be disturbed or learning disabled one year and not the next, depending on whether his teacher likes him or not or whether the teacher is able to meet his social, emotional and academic needs in the classroom. And yet our special classes are filled with children who could make it in regular classes with good teaching and careful structuring of his program of learning. Or worse yet, they are out in the hall, in the principal's office, or sitting at home receiving the administrative and parental pacifier, home instruction.

A great many children fall through this first level of the educational sorting machine because they are not fortunate enough to find the teacher who can individualize the program enough to match the cognitive demands of the task to the specialized learning needs of each child.

If our schools are to be helped to plug up some of the holes at this level of the screening process, and to implement a serious program of individualized learning, the numbers of children referred to special education because of poor teaching must be reduced. Every regular classroom teacher needs to be aware of the wide range of abilities which are considered to be her responsibility. She needs books available so that she can realistically teach the child with second grade reading skills in her fifth grade class, instead of facing 30 fifth grade children ranging in ability from second grade to eighth grade with 30 fifth grade textbooks. Not all of these children belong in special education! Not all of them need to be labeled learning disabled or educable mentally retarded! They are the rightful responsibility of general education. Special educators need to carefully define the population of children whom they will serve, and refuse to become the dumping ground for the by-products of teacher incompetence.

In attempting to meet and combat the problems created by this first level of the sorting and grading process to which we subject children, I would challenge you to implement a three point course of action:

1) Public schools must become more seriously involved in the teacher-training process. New first grade teachers are still being turned out of our universities eligible for teaching certificates, who have never had a course in the teaching of reading. At the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle an elementary teacher was required to have two P.E. courses and only one course in reading, which could be Children's Literature.

   School administrators have a responsibility to protect children from incompetent teachers, regardless of how cute they may be or how dazzling their personalities. Teaching is a skill which can be trained but our teacher-training institutions are not producing teachers who can teach with the requisite degree of competence. In a time in which the supply of teachers exceeds the demand, the climate is ripe for a partnership between the consumer and the producer to provide more practical experience with children before the teacher can become qualified to teach without direct supervision. A year-long internship prior to certification may be a necessary adjunct to our current training programs. Perhaps the accreditation requirements for our teacher training institutes need to be revised to make such a requirement an integral part of the training program.

   It has become mandatory for public schools to become actively and aggressively involved in the training of new teachers so that fewer children will become victims of teaching disabilities.

2) Incompetence is not limited to inexperienced teachers with inadequate experience with children. Some experienced teachers are creating untold problems with children who are victims of sporadic mental health problems in their teachers. I fully recognize that we have a responsibility to teachers who have taught for a number of years, a responsibility to direct them to programs of prevention or treatment, but when that teacher ceases to function as a competent human being for whatever reason, I am more concerned over the protection of

the children in his or her class than I am over the protection of his/her tenure rights. School districts must be provided a viable means of removing disturbed teachers from their posts, short of proving moral turpitude. Provisions for adequate treatment must be provided as well as retirement for mental health purposes, must be built into the State Teacher's Retirement Programs so that teachers who are no longer competent to teach can be removed from the schools and from interacting with children.

3) More adequate and viable inservice training programs need to be built into our educational systems. Inservice programs, poorly conceived, and unrelated to the real problem of classroom management, run in at the end of an exhausting day, have not proven effective.

   School districts are in a position to design university-credited courses which will meet the needs of their teachers and to tell the colleges and universities what needs to be taught. We no longer need to be passive recipients of some of the pap they have chosen to give us.

   Universities and colleges need us. Through programs funded under such federal programs as the Teacher Corps or EPDA, a district can be in a position to design and implement inservice programs relevant to the needs of their experienced teachers. So much for this first level of sorting. Let's look at the Second Level of Screening.

As these children move along in our grading and sorting system, those who have survived the initial sorting system run into a second level of sorting - that imposed by the demands of the curriculum.

At this level those children whose learning styles do not match the demands of the curriculum are culled out and tossed into special education to be further sorted and labeled as EMR, LLD, MBI, ED, etc.

If a child is a visual learner, and the reading program emphasizes visual skills, he will survive this sorting process. If he is a visual learner, with problems in auditory discrimination, and the district has a reading program which emphasizes a phonetic approach to reading, he may be culled out into special education and be labeled LD. If he can learn new math he may be in. If he needs the traditional approach to the basic arithmetic processes, he may be out, a victim of a rigid curriculum which fails to recognize the range of individual differences in learning styles in any normal group of children.

The ability to adapt the demands of any curriculum to the wide range of abilities in children is the responsibility of regular classroom teachers and curriculum specialists - not of special education.

Until special educators become secure enough in their description of the children whom they are employed to serve and develop the guts to place the responsibility for many of the children whom we are asked to serve squarely back on the shoulders of the classroom teacher, we are going to continue to be inundated by children who are not properly our responsibility. We cannot continue to be the whipping boy of general education. If 50% of the children in a school are two years below grade placement, as they are in some of our inner-city schools,

the problem is patently a problem for general education. We must recognize that not all school failures are due to deficits in the psychological processes within the child. Many current failures are organizational as well as educational.

We are not in business to duplicate the program of the regular class. The time has come for special education to become truly supportive in nature, where general education continues to carry central responsibility for the vast majority of children with mildly handicapping conditions, with the special educator functioning as a resource teacher in designing effective prescriptions and in remediating deficits.

When our school district used Scott-Foresman as our basal reading series, the referrals to the learning disability program were largely children with visual processing problems.

When we switched to Open Court, a highly phonetic program, the referrals were heavily weighted with children with auditory processing problems who were not able to meet the demands of the program.

Special education today refers only to those aspects of education which are unique and/or in addition to the regular program for all children. Special education can no longer be a total program, a self-contained program, paralleling the education of the normal child.

Rather, special education should consist of those practices which are unique, uncommon, of unusual quality and in addition to the organization and instructional procedures, used for all children. This "in addition to" may consist solely of providing materials and techniques so that the regular classroom teacher can more effectively meet the broad range of individual differences in her class.

As we turn back to our conveyor, we see that the grading and sorting process continues and the culling becomes finer and finer, with the environmentally disadvantaged being sorted out from the LD population (as if this can be done); the EMR's sorted out from the ED's and the LD's; the Remedial Reading cases from the LD's; the Hearing Impaired sorted into the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing; the orthopedically impaired who can make it in a regular class from those who cannot, and on and on until 25-30% or more of those children coming into first grade are culled out of the regular classroom.

All of this might make some sense if the population who falls through the holes were not tragically inflated by the numbers of children with minimal deviations from the norm who have become victims of teacher incompetence and victims of curricula inflexibility. Can we really justify labeling children "handicapped" when the problem lies outside the child?

If Florida is to live up to the tremendous challenge presented by special education today, if Floridians are to be truly responsive to a commitment to excellence, each of you will need to become personally involved in at least one of the following actions:

1) Become actively involved in or knowledgeable about the Diagnostic Process that determines which children need to be placed in which special education classes; and which are the proper responsibility of the regular classroom teacher.

2) Refuse to see special education classes as an alternative to, but rather as an extension of, regular classroom placement;

3) Re-define the handicapped group who really need to be in segregated classes, facing squarely such issues as why LD programs are filled with white middle class suburban kids, and EMR classes heavily weighted with black inner-city children. Ask yourself, is this child really completely unable to profit from interacting with normal children for any part of the day? Is placement in a special class administratively expedient?

4) If you are a teacher, become involved in student teaching assignments in your districts, agitating for more active involvement at the district level in teaching and supervision of methods and practicum courses. If you are in an administrative capacity, design an aggressive proposal for a consortium between your district and teacher training institution for joint responsibility for methods courses and student teaching, with public school teachers being paid by university funds at an appropriate rate:

5) As a teacher, volunteer for aggressive participation in inservice training plans instead of criticizing the poor planning so apparent in many current inservice courses; if you are a parent or board of education member, evaluate your district's inservice program. Is it doing what you think needs to be done? Volunteer to be the parent member of the committee handling inservice.

6) Become involved in writing proposed course outlines for inservice courses to be taught on a credit basis by the university in your district:

7) As teachers, become actively involved in NEA, MEA, or whatever group represents teachers in your district working on an equitable solution to the continued contractual agreement - teacher incompetence dichotomy. Children must be protected from mental cruelty at the hands of tenured teachers who have become incompetent. As parents, increase your demands for changes of teachers or classes <u>this</u> year, if you are certain you are right in your evaluation. The concept of early retirement for mental health reasons is at least as compelling as early retirement for reasons of physical health.

Special education makes sense for those children who need it. But we do not exist to respond to the needs of teachers who want to teach only the nice, fat, round, smooth, evenly shaped specimens who have managed to survive the sorting and grading process of our current educational system!